

Binsted Arts Poetry Competition 2017 Results and Adjudication Report

Binsted Arts are very pleased to announce the winners of this year's poetry competition, and to present the judge's adjudication report.

We look forward to welcoming you at the prize-giving evening, on the third day of the Binsted Arts Festival, Saturday 10 June, at 7.30 in Binsted Church, when you can hear all the prizewinning and commended poems read out, as well as a reading of her poems by Clare Best, our judge.

This is a free event, but we would appreciate knowing if you intend to come as the church is only small. To book: *Email:* bafbooking@edmart.plus.com. or *Phone:* 01243 555778.

Results

First: Camilla Lambert for Blood Donor

Second: Beth Somerford for The Land as a Map of Itself

Third : Gaia Holmes for Stash

Highly Commended

Pat Borthwick	In Praise of the Oologist's Art
Christopher James	One Year I did Potatoes
Claire Pankhurst	Picking Beans
Caroline Gill	First Pressing
Shelley McAlister	Harvest to Decorate a Grave

Commended

Diana Mitchener	Harvesting Dew
Philip Burton	Harvest of Youth
Sarah Wimbush	Threshin'
Eve Jackson	Environment
Tim Dawes	Harvest

Blood donor by Camilla Lambert

It is the season
for the taking of blood.
No Breugel harvest scene,
but bodies prone as tumbled stooks
amid the pumps, the tubes
and document sheaves.
A deep red booty is sucked up,
carted off discreetly
to be stacked on the shelves
of antiseptic larders.

I think of you,
and how my blood was drawn
into an inch-long phial
to boost your courage, small
flailing creature. I would have drained
all my body's reservoirs
to keep your hazelnut heart
still beating, your gummy lungs
inflating and deflating
beneath translucent skin.

This time, they tell me,
they'll winnow my red cells
for a baby, store the rest as plasma.
I think of other parents, dumb
witnesses on the field-edge,
and of how I woke that morning
to see a flock of seagulls
scavenging over the stubble,
wide transparent wings
ice white in the early sun.

The Land as a Map of Itself by Beth Somerford

The half moon chalks a perfect parachute
on Wedgwood sky and in the barley hangs
suspicion of a dew. This is a corner where
the pastures still have names, and their recital
chimes like shipping forecasts; where the earth
plummets too steeply for machinery -
so that the fields are various, and edged
with ditches or the dark cross-stitch of thorns.

By the dew pond is a woman with a map,
which tells her where she stands. She
imagines that it shows a tiny woman with
a map, which shows a dew pond and
a woman (and a map), as if she rose a furrow
long, then ten, above the ground; the distant
hawthorn turning into lichen clumps,
the mesh of Sussex spreading out below.

She wonders if the village church, the windmill,
might be merely outlines of themselves, lain flat
beside the road like their own shadows; the
embankment really tattooed on the grass.
She folds the map; the fields begin to speak
of flowers blazing feral in their margins.

Stash by Gaia Holmes

I want to be
soused herring,
smoked kippers,
fruit leathers
and salted cod.

I want to be
pickled lemons,
brandied cherries,
bottled peaches
and candied flowers.

I want to be
lambent riches
in a thin winter,
the spices that sweeten
the short, cold days,
something
you will want
to sing about.

I want to be
one of those things
you'd forgotten you had
glowing like summer
on the top shelf
of the cupboard,
blooming brightly
in the back
of your head.

**Binsted Arts Poetry Competition adjudication report
Clare Best, April 2017**

It has been a particular pleasure to read and think about poems on the theme of harvest – and doing this in the spring, the other side of the year from harvest, has given a nice edge to the process. Perhaps for poets thinking of entering a competition, a theme can appear to be an extra hurdle. Should I enter this poem I've already written? Might I tweak or adapt this one which is almost on theme? Can I send in a poem in which the connection seems tenuous? How will my poem stand out among so many on one subject? And even for the person reading all the poems, the theme might sometimes seem a bit much. Will this theme mean I encounter a lot of repetition? How to keep my reading palate cleansed for the subtle differences of tone and subject matter? Will this theme discourage some poets from entering, and therefore will it narrow the field more than an un-themed competition? Etc etc.

But in fact I believe themes do offer a number of positive challenges for both those sending in poems and the person reading/judging. For the poet submitting, it probably means s/he thinks even harder about what to write, what to submit, about how to make the poem/s fresh and help them to stand out. For the reader/judge, or for this one anyway, the narrowing of subject matter certainly brought a good deal of reflection about which kinds of metaphors and image banks are commonplace or clichéd for the theme, and about what it is that makes for a remarkable poem. I am grateful to the writers and to the poems for the tight focus on the theme, and for the depth it has brought to my thinking over the past few weeks.

So, in general, of course there were a lot of poems about actual physical harvest, about fields and crops and fruit. Many of these were concerned with nostalgia and memory and often seemed to be informed by clear and close and often fascinating knowledge of rural practices. There was much to commend them as pieces of writing, even if some were more descriptions than poems.

Then there were poems in which the idea of harvest was used as more of an extended metaphor to look at relationships or historical events (wars, particularly) and among these I found a stimulating range in terms both of content and form.

Yet another group of poems stood in a slant or oblique relationship to the theme and discussed subjects and ideas that were associated with harvest – fruition, failure, hunger, passing seasons, ripeness, timeliness, and of course mortality and death.

The poems that stayed in the race after several readings, and which then formed the longlist, were those in which either skilful craft or the fact of having something new to say made them stand above others. Those poems that made it through from the longlist to the shortlist were poems in which *both* fine craft and fresh or surprising content were evident.

The group of winners stood out all the way from first readings. Repeated and more forensic readings drew out of each poem a range of strengths. One important feature of a ‘winning’ poem is staying power – the good poem will continue to release new layers of meaning and subtlety on successive readings. It has to satisfy the reader in various moods, at various times of day, in various ways. It has to be robust enough to withstand closer and closer examination, and above all it must be clear that the poet has thought very hard indeed about the relationship between content and form.

Winning poems

Blood Donor – Camilla Lambert

First Prize

This poem has a confidence in its treatment of the most difficult of subject matter, from the first line. That use of ‘the taking of blood’ rather than just ‘taking blood’ prepares us for something of the gravity of what is to come. The brief vision of a Breugel harvest scene, set up and then immediately replaced by the image of ‘bodies prone as tumbled stooks / amid the pumps, the tubes’ is a most effective juxtaposition. The passivity of the scene is well judged too, the sense that blood harvesting is, for the donor, essentially a passive giving – even the ‘antiseptic larders’ are places of waiting and anonymity. But then the second stanza takes the reader into another gear ‘I think of you’ and from here the poem tumbles into its own heart. That judicious use of the word ‘courage’ is wonderful, as is the image of the ‘hazelnut heart’. The poem avoids sentimentality and emerges from stanza two vulnerable ‘inflating and deflating / beneath translucent skin’ but purposeful and with more still to say. In stanza three the poem broadens out to encompass ‘other parents’ and the metaphor of harvest is brought back with careful use of ‘winnow’, ‘store’, ‘stubble’ – all words with rich banks of meaning. The last image of the poem, that of the vision of ‘a flock of seagulls / scavenging over the stubble, / wide transparent wings / ice white in the early sun’ has an uncanny chill and beautifully balances the ‘translucent skin’ at the end of stanza two. This is a powerful, considered, well-honed and precise piece of writing which has the ring of absolute authenticity. A most deserving winner, and a poem that will remain with me always. Congratulations, Camilla.

The Land as a Map of Itself – Beth Somerford

2nd prize

The visual puzzle, the conundrum of this poem, announced in the title and then introduced in the second stanza, is a delightful one, and I admired its boldness. The poem is playful but not lightweight, a tricky balance to achieve. Stanza one presents a picturesque image of a barley field, indeed an entire landscape, in the morning, and before harvest. The economy of these eight lines is admirable, and the detail acutely observed, right down to that image of the 'dark cross-stitch of thorns'. The second stanza takes us into the puzzle, the perspective drawing back and back (and who has *not* had thoughts like this, trying to work out how things are in a landscape and on a map?) allowing the reader to hover above the land about to be harvested, and look at it in a different way – perhaps seeing the map as a collection of the land, the land itself as gathered into the poet's mind. By stanza three we are, to all intents and purposes, inside the imagination of the woman holding the map, and I enjoyed the strange charm of this, right up to the moment when a different kind of reality is apparent as 'She folds the map; the fields begin to speak / of flowers blazing feral in their margins'. Here the flowers become another kind of harvest, and in fact the entire poem becomes its own harvest – the rich imaginings gleaned from the observed landscape. A strikingly unusual poem, daring in the way it looks at landscape and examines human life within it. Thought-provoking and with a great eye for detail in the images. Congratulations, Beth.

Stash – Gaia Holmes

3rd prize

I appreciated very much the musicality of this poem (strongly rhythmical short lines and with much effective use of assonance and consonance), and its sense of joyous abundance which is cleverly achieved with very spare use of qualifiers. The title is excellent! The lists are finely judged – not too long, the choice of items and the diction original, often strange and tantalising. I like the way the 'you' only comes in at the end of stanza three and then is foregrounded in stanza four, allowing the whole poem to click into place. This is a truly satisfying piece, with a vibrancy and set of colours all its own. It is also a poem of ambition, moving as it does from the lists of the first two stanzas to a touchingly vulnerable sense of self-value for other as expressed in stanzas three and four. Neatly achieved, witty, surprising and delightfully conversational. Well done, Gaia.

Highly Commended poems

In Praise of the Oologists' Art – Pat Borthwick

An authoritative and interesting poem, on a fascinating subject. The poet conjures in great detail the world of the oologist. I like that the diction is so unashamedly specific, although I was hoping for a little more mystery. Powerful final image, supporting the entire poem.

Picking beans – Claire Pankhurst

This poem simultaneously holds so much strong emotion and restraint. Hugely effective. I like the short lines that mimic the process of memory emerging. For me, this poem could be honed even further to tighten the screws to the limit.

Harvest to decorate a grave – Shelley McAlister

Original and well executed. Beautiful visual and colour variety in the plants chosen. It's a challenging theme to sustain and in one or two places I thought the choices didn't work quite as well as in others. This poem might have been stronger for being shorter.

First pressing, Hadrian's villa – Caroline Gill

Evocative and imbued with a real fruitfulness. I thought this poem really came into its own at the opening and towards the end. I was unsure about 'fun and feasting' which seemed to compromise the rather classical tone.

One year I did potatoes – Christopher James

A strong narrative poem with an assured voice. Satisfying sense of movement and urgency in the physical. I wondered if in places the syntax might have served the poem better. Beautiful ending.

Commended poems

Each of these had at least one strong feature which carried me enough in the reading to make me think on second or third reading 'This could be a really good poem'. These five poems stood out at least as much for their ambition as for their accomplishment. An ambitious poem is one that wants to be terrific, and that can only ever be the right thing. We must keep stretching ourselves as writers.